

Nationalism: Phenomenology & Critique

By Alain de Benoist

Translated by Greg Johnson

There are probably as many theories of nationalism as there are nationalist theories. It is obviously impossible to give an account of them here. We will not take part in the false quarrel over whether nationalism is a pathological exacerbation of patriotism, or if it represents, on the contrary, its conscious and rigorous doctrinal elaboration. Let us note only that, beyond the often extremely complex typologies suggested today,[1] nationalism can be defined in two basic ways.

First, nationalism is the more or less voluntary aspiration, founded on objective facts or not, of a people to be constituted (or restored) as a nation, generally in a context perceived as hostile to its collective identity. Thus it presents itself as a movement of historical construction. In the second definition, nationalism is the political doctrine that affirms that a government must be concerned above all with the national interest, even based upon it exclusively.

These two definitions show from the start the ambivalence of nationalism, an ambivalence directly related to its eminently reactive character. Nationalism generally appears in circumstances that are “exceptional,” in Carl Schmitt’s sense of the term. Nationalism aims at reacting against a threat, real or supposed, that would weigh upon the collective identity and prevent it from founding itself as or persisting as a nation. Nationalism, for example, appears just as much in reaction to a foreign occupation as in a situation of colonization, in the framework of an exacerbated regionalism, etc. Its essence, therefore, is related to conflict. It needs an enemy. But this enemy can take the most diverse forms. Hence the plasticity of nationalism which, in history, can just as well be modern or antimodern, intellectual or popular, of the Right or Left. (During the whole nineteenth century, let us recall, nationalism was primarily liberal and republican.)

The definition of nationalism as a political doctrine raises other problems. Once an identity is recovered or the nation emerges, what in nationalism can truly be used as a principle of government? The concept of “national interest” is fuzzy. Maurras writes that a nationalist “subordinates his feelings, his interests, and his systems to the good of the fatherland.” But what faction would not lay claim to this expression? The “good of the fatherland” is a concept for which almost anything can be claimed, the more so as one can have extremely different ideas about it. Given that conflict is of the essence of nationalism, the risk is then great that a nationalist government can exist only while engaging in new arenas of conflict. Any foreigner, for example, will be potentially seen as an enemy. As for the concept of an “inner enemy,” it will lead to civil war, which nationalism seems to prohibit on principle.

The contents of nationalism thus remain rather obscure. One sees nationalist movements appearing in the world, but in general they have few things in common. They are opposed to one another. They claim contradictory values. It all seems as if nationalism were more a form than a substance, a container than a content.

One can understand it better, however, if one relates it to the idea of the nation, from which it cannot be dissociated. Indeed, nationalism initially represents a political instrumentality of the collective identity that gives rise to the nation. However, the nation is only one form of polity among others. And it is a specifically modern form.

Neither the Gallic resistance against Caesar nor that of Arminius against the legions of Varus is relevant to our sense of “nationalism.” The application of the word “nation” to Antiquity or the Old Regime is for the most part an anachronism. In the Middle Ages, the “nation” (from *natio*, “birth”) had a cultural or ethnic sense, but by no means a political one. At the time of the Hundred Years War, patriotism refers to the “country” (*pays*), i.e., to both a familiar region and an ensemble of intermediate bodies concretely defining a shared identity. In the political sense, the nation appears only in the eighteenth century, and it is defined in opposition to the king. The “patriots” then were those who thought the nation, not the king, incarnates the unity of the country, i.e., the nation exists independently of the kingdom. The nation joins together those who share the same political and philosophical ideas. It is in this sense that Barrère[2] was able to say to the Convention that “the aristocrats have no fatherland.” The nation is thus initially perceived as the sovereign people, then as the population of a given territory recognizing the authority of the same state and themselves as members of the same political unity, and finally as this political unity itself. One reads, in Article 3 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man: “The principle of any sovereignty lies primarily in the nation.”

The Old Regime in France had already largely started the process of centralization. The Revolution continued this process in a new form. It aimed at “producing the nation,” creating a new social bond, generating social behaviors giving rise to the nation as a body politic formed of equal individuals. The state, consequently, became the *producer of the social*. And this production was built on the ruins of the intermediate bodies. Beginning with the Revolution, the nation became for any individual an *immediate* presence. It is a collective abstraction to which one belongs *directly*, without the mediation of intermediate bodies or the state. There is thus, paradoxically, an individualistic root of the nation and nationalism. Louis Dumont has written on this subject:

Historically, the nation in the precise, modern sense of the term, and nationalism—distinguished from simple patriotism—have depended upon individualism as a value. The nation is precisely the type of overall society corresponding to the reign of individualism as a value. Not only does the nation accompany individualism historically, but the interdependence of the two is essential, so that one can say that the nation is a society composed of people who regard themselves as individuals.[3]

The “modernity” of the nation and nationalism remained unseen for a long time, initially because nationalism was at times *also* a reaction (or an answer) to the social and political dysfunctions born of modernity, then, starting in the late nineteenth century, because the political Right took up the national idea in opposition to the “internationalist” socialist movements.

This individualistic and modern sense of the national idea allows us to understand how nationalism falls within the horizon of the metaphysics of subjectivity. Heidegger, who sees subjectivity as the modern form (*Gestalt*) of being oneself (*Selbstsein*), writes in this connection:

Any nationalism is, on the metaphysical plane, an anthropologism and as such a

subjectivism. Nationalism is not overcome by pure internationalism, but only enlarged and established as a system. Nationalism is as little brought and raised to *humanitas* by internationalism as individualism is by ahistorical collectivism. Collectivism is the subjectivity of man on the plane of totality.[4]

At the same time this also clarifies the relationship between nationalism and liberal individualism: the “we” that forms the base of the former is only an enlargement of the “I” characteristic of the latter. In liberalism, it is legitimate for the individual always to seek his own best interest; in nationalism, the national interest precedes all. In both cases, justice and truth merge with what is good *for me* or *for us*. In both cases, the ultimate decision lies in subjective interest, that is, in utility.

In the quotation above, Heidegger shows just as well that political universalism (“pure internationalism”) does not fundamentally contradict nationalism. Exacerbated ethnocentrism, moreover, is defined quite classically as the private individual enlarged to universal dimensions, and universalism, conversely, as a masked ethnocentrism. The private individual attests only to *his* truth, but he tends to present it as *the* truth in itself. Such is the base of the pretense of certain peoples or certain nations to be regarded as “chosen,” i.e., called to fulfill a “universal mission.” France has not escaped this temptation, and even succumbed more often than others. Guizot declared: “France is the heart of civilization.” Lavissee added: “Our fatherland is most human of the fatherlands,” thus giving to understand that there exist degrees of “humanity.” In fact, it is often said that French nationalism cannot be fundamentally intolerant because in France the idea of the nation goes along with that of humanity. But this assertion makes one wonder. Indeed, if the idea of the nation goes with that of humanity, then the idea of humanity also goes with that of the nation. Whoever does not belong to the nation consequently finds himself excluded from humanity.

Any claim of collective identity need not necessarily be formulated in terms of the ideology of nationalism. Such a confusion, given the historical excesses of nationalism, could only call into question the value of the very concept of collective identity. Yet such a concept, regardless of methods and foundations, is essential to any true sociality. In communist societies, it is what made it possible for the people to survive by opposing their own identity to the one the regime tried to impose upon them. In Western society, it is what continues to nourish the symbolic imagination and give meaning to the desire to live together. Nationalism, in what is most tumultuous and questionable in it, is no more the inevitable consequence of the assertion of collective identities than is the nation the only way of politically organizing the citizenry. Indeed, it is the negation of collective identities, such as we encounter throughout the twentieth century in liberalism as well as in Communism, that causes these identities to assume irredentist, convulsive, and destructive forms.

To be more precise, let us say that there are two different ways to pose the affirmation of a collective identity. The first, which could be that of nationalism, restricts the individual to defending *his* people, while the second, concerned above all with diversity, sees the necessity of defending *all* peoples against the ideologies that threaten to eradicate them.

Consider the English saying “My country, right or wrong.” This saying is generally misunderstood. It does not state that membership is a mere fact from which one cannot draw an abstraction. It also says that my country can be right or wrong—and not that it is always right.

Yet, in all rigor, a nationalist could not recognize his country is wrong, simply because to judge it wrong, he must have a criterion of justice that goes beyond mere belonging, i.e., ultimately, a clear awareness of the objective truth. A nationalist is spontaneously carried from thinking his country is never wrong to thinking that it is always right. From such a point of view, in the event of conflict, only force can decide. Force then becomes the supreme value. It is identified with truth, which means that history is basically right: the winners are always right, for the sole reason that they won. One paradoxically lapses into social Darwinism, which is only another form of the ideology of progress.

If, on the contrary, I can judge my country wrong, without forgetting it is mine, that is because I know that my membership is not a criterion of objective truth. Then I leave behind the metaphysics of subjectivity, the point where nationalism and liberal individualism converge. The identity of others is no longer in principle a threat to mine. I am ready to defend my identity because this defense is a general principle, whose legitimacy I also recognize for others. In other words, if I defend my “tribe,” it is also because I am ready to defend those of others.

Notes

Alain de Benoist, “Nationalisme : phénoménologie et critique,” in his *Critiques—Théoriques* (Lausanne, Switzerland: L’Age d’Homme, 2002), 85–88. The translator wishes to thank Alain de Benoist for his permission to translate and publish this essay, Michael O’Meara for checking the translation, and Arjuna for his help with French idioms.

1. Cf. in particular Gil Delannoï et Pierre-André Taguieff, eds., *Théories du nationalisme. Nation, nationalité, ethnicité* (Paris: Kimé, 1991).

2. Bertrand Barrère de Vieuzac (1755–1841)—TOQ.

3. Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l’individualisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 20–21. English translation: *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

4. Martin Heidegger, *Über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1946), 107. English translation by Frank A. Capuzzi, with J. Glenn Gray and David Farrell Krell: “Letter on Humanism,” in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, revised and expanded edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 244.